

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11
EB-08 TRSE-00 OMB-01 /075 W
-----121852 201843Z /46

R 201716Z JUL 78
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8383
INFO ALL EC CAPITALS
AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 11540

USEEC ALSO FOR EMBASSY

USTECD
E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK
SUBJECT: GENERAL ELECTIONS: A NEW OPTION OPENING?

REF: LONDON 10034

SUMMARY: THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP) EXECUTIVE
RECENTLY RECOMMENDED THAT THE PARTY'S PARLIAMENTARY
GROUP SEEK A DEAL WITH THE GOVERNMENT IN WHICH THE SNP
WOULD PLEDGE ITS SUPPORT TO THE LTPERNHENT I
CONFIDENCE SITUATIONS IN RETURN FOR A FIRM COMMITMENT, INCLUDING SPECI
FIC DATES WNQ FROM THE GOVERNMENT FOR THE
REFERENDUM ON DEVOLUTION AND ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS. SUCH
AN ARRANGEMENT, AS THE SNP SEES IT, WOULD BE SIMPLIER
THAN THAT NOW EXISTING BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE
LIBERALS AND WOULD GIVE THE GOVERNMENT A NOTIONAL
MAJORITY OF 15 VOTES OVER THE COMBINED OPPOSITION.
CALLAGHAN WOULD THUS HAVE THE OPTION OF CARRYING ON
INTO A NEW PARLIAMENTARY SESSION, SHOULD HE SO DESIRE.
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AS YET, HOWEVER, THE NATIONALIST MPS HAVE SPURNED THE
GUIDANCE OF THEIR PARTY LEADERS, WIDENING THE GULF
BETWEEN THEMSELVES AND EDINBURGH. WHILE THIS PARTICU-
LAR GAME HAS YET TO PLAY OUT, THE EXISTENCE OF A
VIABLE ELECTION DATE OPTION WOULD STRENGTHEN CALLAGHAN'S
TACTICAL, IF NOT POPULAR, POSITION. END SUMMARY.

1. CONCERNED THAT A CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT ELECTED IN THE FALL MIGHT SEEK TO OVERTURN THE LABOR GOVERNMENT'S DEVOLUTION LEGISLATION BEFORE A REFERENDUM COULD BE HELD, OR THAT THE TORY-DOMINATED HOUSE OF LORDS MAY DELAY ENACTMENT OF THE SCOTLAND AND WALES DEVOLUTION BILLS UNTIL AFTER THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION--IN WHICH CASE NO STATUTORY REVOCATION WOULD BE REQUIRED IF THE TORIES WERE ELECTED AND COMMONS FAILED TO ACT ON THE BILL--THE EXECUTIVE OF THE SNP RECENTLY UNANIMOUSLY RECOMMENDED THAT ITS PARLIAMENTARY GROUP SEEK AN UNDERSTANDING WITH THE GOVERNMENT IN WHICH THE SNP WOULD COMMIT ITS 11 VOTES TO THE GOVERNMENT IN CONFIDENCE SITUATIONS IN RETURN FOR THE GOVERNMENT SETTING FIRM DATES FOR THE DEVOLUTION REFERENDUM AND, IF FAVORABLE, ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS BEFORE CALLING A GENERAL ELECTION. SNP OFFICIALS STRESS THAT SUCH A DEAL WOULD BE MORE NARROWLY DEFINED THAN THE CURRENT ARRANGEMENT BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE LIBERALS, SINCE THERE WOULD BE A SPECIFIC QUID PRO QUO. DIVERGING VIEWS BETWEEN THE SNP LEADERSHIP BASED IN SCOTLAND AND THE PARTY'S 11 MPS HAVE BEEN NOTED IN OUR PREVIOUS REPORTING AND WERE INTENSIFIED BY THE PARLIAMENTARY GROUP'S JULY 18 DECISION TO REJECT THE ADVICE FROM EDINBURGH, THOUGH WE UNDERSTAND THE SNP PARLIAMENTARIANS ARE DIVIDED ON THE ISSUE. ALTHOUGH THE GAME HAS NOT PLAYED OUT, THE SNP'S PARLIAMENTARY GROUP HAS REFUSED TO BARGAIN WITH THE

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GOVERNMENT, THOUGH SOME EXPLORATORY CONVERSATIONS HAVE TAKEN PLACE.

2. AS WE REPORTED PREVIOUSLY (REFTEL), CALLAGHAN HAS BEEN SEEKING AN ARRANGEMENT WITH ONE OR MORE OF THE MINOR PARTIES WHICH WOULD ALLOW HIM TO AVOID A GENERAL ELECTION IN THE AUTUMN, SHOULD THAT APPEAR TO BE A POLITICALLY ADVISABLE COURSE OF ACTION. WHILE THE SCOTTISH FISH HAS TAKEN THE BAIT, THE HOOK HAS NOT YET BEEN SET NOR THE FISH LANDED. AN ACCORD WITH THE SNP WOULD GIVE THE GOVERNMENT A NOTIONAL MAJORITY OF 15 VOTES, WITH ALL OTHER PARTIES (INCLUDING THE LIBERALS) VOTING IN OPPOSITION. AND SHOULD THE DEAL BE STRUCK, IT IS HIGHLY PROBABLE THAT THE THREE PLAID CYMRU MPS WOULD GO ALONG

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 LONDON 11540

WITH THEIR SCOTTISH BRETHREN, GIVING CALLAGHAN A COM-
FORTABLE 21-VOTE ADVANTAGE IN A CONFIDENCE SITUATION.
SUCH AN ARRANGEMENT WOULD ALLOW HIM TO DELAY AN ELECTION
UNTIL JUNE 1979--IT IS GENERALLY ASSUMED THAT THE
REFERENDUM WOULD BE HELD IN THE FALL, THE ASSEMBLY
ELECTIONS IN THE EARLY SPRING, DUE TO THE TIME NEEDED TO
SELECT CANDIDATES AND COMPLETE OTHER ARRANGEMENTS, AND
A GENERAL ELECTION AT LEAST 60 DAYS THEREAFTER, AS
CURRENTLY REQUIRED BY THE DEVOLUTION BILLS.

3. WHILE OUR GOVERNMENT CONTACTS ARE NOT OPTIMISTIC THAT
A DEAL CAN BE WORKED OUT, THEY BELIEVE AN ARRANGEMENT
WITH THE SNP IS POSSIBLE AND THAT THIS POSSIBILITY
STRENGTHENS CALLAGHAN'S POLITICAL HAND BY INCREASING
TORY UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE ELECTION TIMING. PRIVATELY,
HOWEVER, THEY CONCEDE THAT THE FALL ELECTION HYPOTHESIS
HAS TAKEN ON A MOMENTUM WHICH WOULD BE HARD TO STOP,
BARRING A SHARP REVERSAL IN LABOR'S POLITICAL FORTUNES.
THUS THEY BELIEVE IT WOULD BE DAMAGING FOR CALLAGHAN TO
DELAY PAST THE AUTUMN. NEVERTHELESS, THEY EXPECT HE WILL
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PLAY THE FISH HE HAS ON THE LINE, JUST TO KEEP THE
OPTION OPEN.

4. THERE ARE TWO OTHER INTERESTING AND SIGNIFICANT

ASPECTS OF THIS DEVELOPMENT. THE SNP EXECUTIVE'S STRATEGY ORIGINATED WITH BREAKAWAY LABOR MP JIM SILLARS WHO HAS BEEN PUSHING THIS LINE WITH THE SNP LEADERS FOR SOME TIME. HE ARGUES THAT THE SNP HAS NOTHING TO LOSE BY THIS STRATEGY AND MUCH TO GAIN--IT WOULD ENSURE THE TORIES COULD NOT BLOCK IMPLEMENTATION OF DEVOLUTION AND, IN ADDITION, WOULD GIVE THE SNP ADDITIONAL TIME TO TRY TO RESTORE ITS CURRENTLY SAGGING POLITICAL STOCK. THAT IT WOULD ALSO HELP ASSURE SILLARS' POLITICAL FUTURE--MOST OBSERVERS BELIEVE HE WILL LOSE HIS WESTMINSTER SEAT IN THE GENERAL ELECTION--IS NOT INCIDENTAL. BUT EVEN MORE SIGNIFICANT, HIS ABILITY TO SELL THE ARGUMENT TO THE SNP'S "HOME" LEADERSHIP HAS DEEPEMED THE DIVIDE BETWEEN IT AND THE PARTY'S MPS. FROM THE GOVERNMENT'S VIEWPOINT THIS IS A HELPFUL DEVELOPMENT. EVEN THOUGH THE SNP HAS NOT TAKEN A FINAL DECISION, ITS INTERNAL DIVISIONS HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO PUBLIC VIEW, AND THE SCARS ARE LIKELY TO REMAIN VISABLE FOR SOME TIME. INDEED OUR SNP SOURCES INDICATE THAT PARTY LEADERS ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY DISSATISFIED WITH AND CONTEMPTUOUS OF ITS PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATIVES. WHILE OUR GOVERNMENT SOURCES STEADFASTLY DENY THAT SILLARS HAS ACTED AS THEIR AGENT IN THIS MATTER (AND KNOWING SILLARS AND THE STRENGTH OF ANIMOSITY TOWARD HIM AMONG HIS FORMER COLLEAGUES, WE FIND THESE DISCLAIMERS CONVINCING), THERE IS NO DENYING THAT HE AND CALLAGHAN HAVE COMPLEMENTARY INTERESTS IN THIS MATTER.

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